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COLUMBIAN HISTORICAL EXPOSITION, MADRID.

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ANCIENT MEXICAN FEATHER WORK AT THE  
COLUMBIAN HISTORICAL EXPOSI-  
TION AT MADRID.

BY

ZELIA NUTTALL.

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## ANCIENT MEXICAN FEATHER WORK AT THE COLUMBIAN HISTORICAL EXPOSITION AT MADRID.

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By ZELIA NUTTALL, Delegate of the Peabody Museum of American Archæology and Ethnology, Cambridge,  
Mass., U. S. A.

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Since my interest in ancient Mexican feather work was stimulated, some years ago, by the quaintly illustrated Laurentian manuscript of Sahagun's *Historia*, I have made efforts to ascertain how many representative specimens of this peculiar indigenous art are in existence at the present day.

In 1890 I submitted to the members of the International Congress of Americanists, assembled in Paris, a description and colored photographs of a beautiful specimen of native feather work that I had discovered in Florence, and expressed at the same time the hope to learn of similar relics elsewhere. Although my hope was not realized before the opening of the exhibition at Madrid, I fully expected that this would draw forth from obscurity some fine samples of the curious art. My expectations, on the whole, were not realized, and I was obliged to assume that, as such relics were not forthcoming on this momentous occasion, they probably did not exist. As the majority of specimens known were, however, assembled in the exhibition, in the original, or in counterpart, I was afforded at all events an unprecedented opportunity for making a review of the remnants that have thus far escaped destruction.

The present report, which I have amplified by references to all relics of the kind that have come under my notice during my researches in European museums, aims at being a complete inventory of all specimens of ancient Mexican feather work, dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, known to be in existence at the present day. As such it may not only prove useful for future reference, but also stimulate an interest which may lead to the discovery of further specimens.

The only original pieces of Mexican feather work, dating from about the time of the Conquest, contained in the whole exhibition, were the two shields belonging to the Royal Museum at Stuttgart. These were displayed in the section of the Imperial German Government, and their presence deserves appreciative recognition.

A fine copy of a similar contemporary shield, preserved at the National Museum of the City of Mexico, was exhibited in the Mexican section. This shield is of especial historical interest, for, after having in all probability, formed part of the presents sent by Cortes to Charles V, it was preserved in Austria for nearly three centuries, and was only sent back to Mexico at the instance of the ill-fated Emperor Maximilian, who presented it to the National Museum.

Among the objects exhibited by the National Museum of Washington was a large water-colored sketch of the shield discovered by the writer in 1890, at the Castle of Ambras, Tyrol. Since then it and other ancient Mexican relics have been transferred to the Imperial Museum at Vienna. In an adjoining room, in the same section, I displayed a similar copy in oil colors, and subsequently presented it to the newly founded National Museum at Madrid.

The four above-mentioned shields, illustrated descriptions of which have been published<sup>1</sup>, belong to the category of gala shields, such as were used by native chieftains in ceremonial dances, etc.

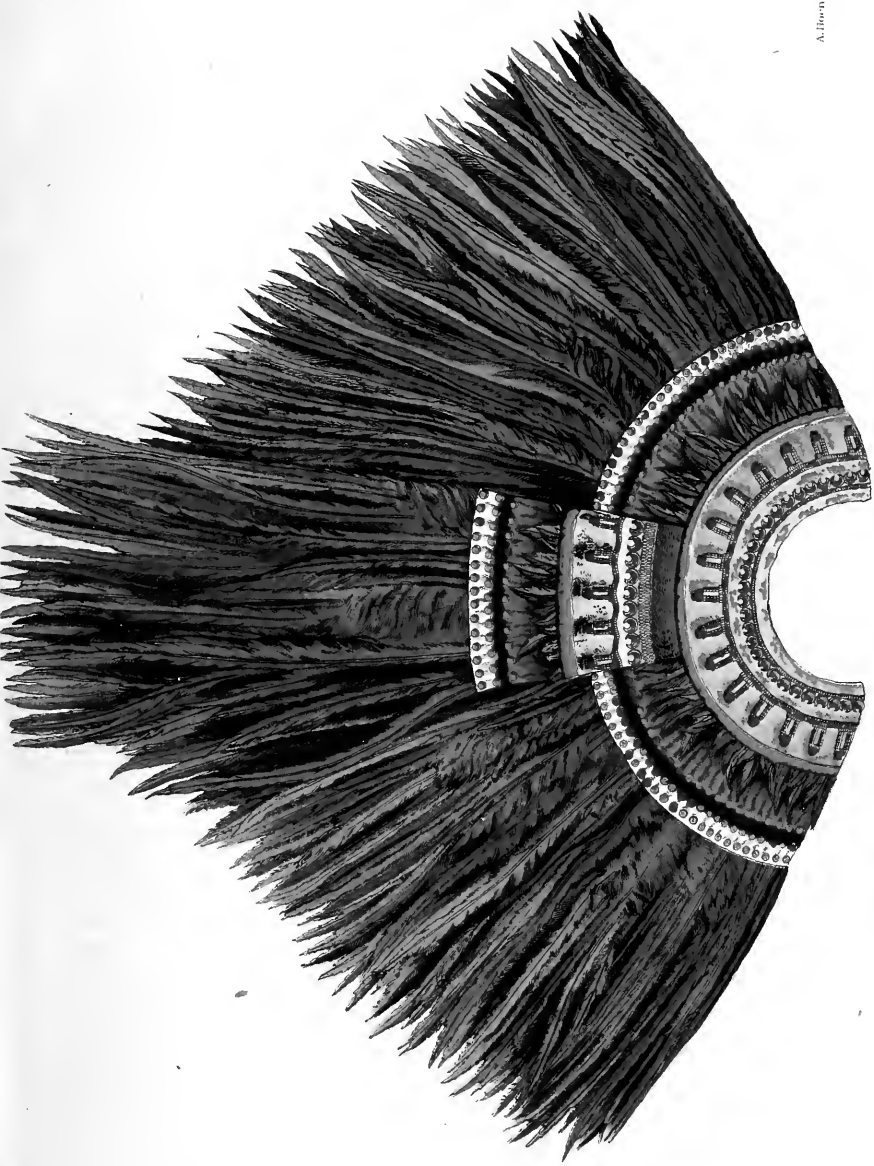
They are composed of narrow strips of cane skillfully interwoven with cotton threads and surrounded by a circular wooden frame. This foundation was covered with leather, as in the specimen in the National Museum of Mexico, or with fine agave paper, as in the other specimens, and on the smooth surface thus obtained the feather mosaic was glued.

The Ambras shield is by far the best preserved and most valuable example of the kind. It was originally adorned with a magnificent fringe composed of Quetzal feathers and displays a boldly drawn monster, probably a coyote, whose eyes, claws, teeth, and outlines are marked by thin pieces or strips of gold, applied in a skillful and peculiar manner.

The probabilities are that this, as well as the other three shields, was among the presents sent by Cortes to the Emperor Charles V. It certainly belonged to a nephew of the Emperor Archduke Ferdinand of Tyrol, and is minutely described in the inventory of his famous collection of armor, dated 1596. In this same document the magnificent piece of feather work (Pl. I) now preserved at Vienna, is designated as a hat or headdress. In later inventories, when it had lost a part of its original decoration, it was described as an apron. Subsequently it was described respectively by different writers as a cloak and a standard.<sup>2</sup>

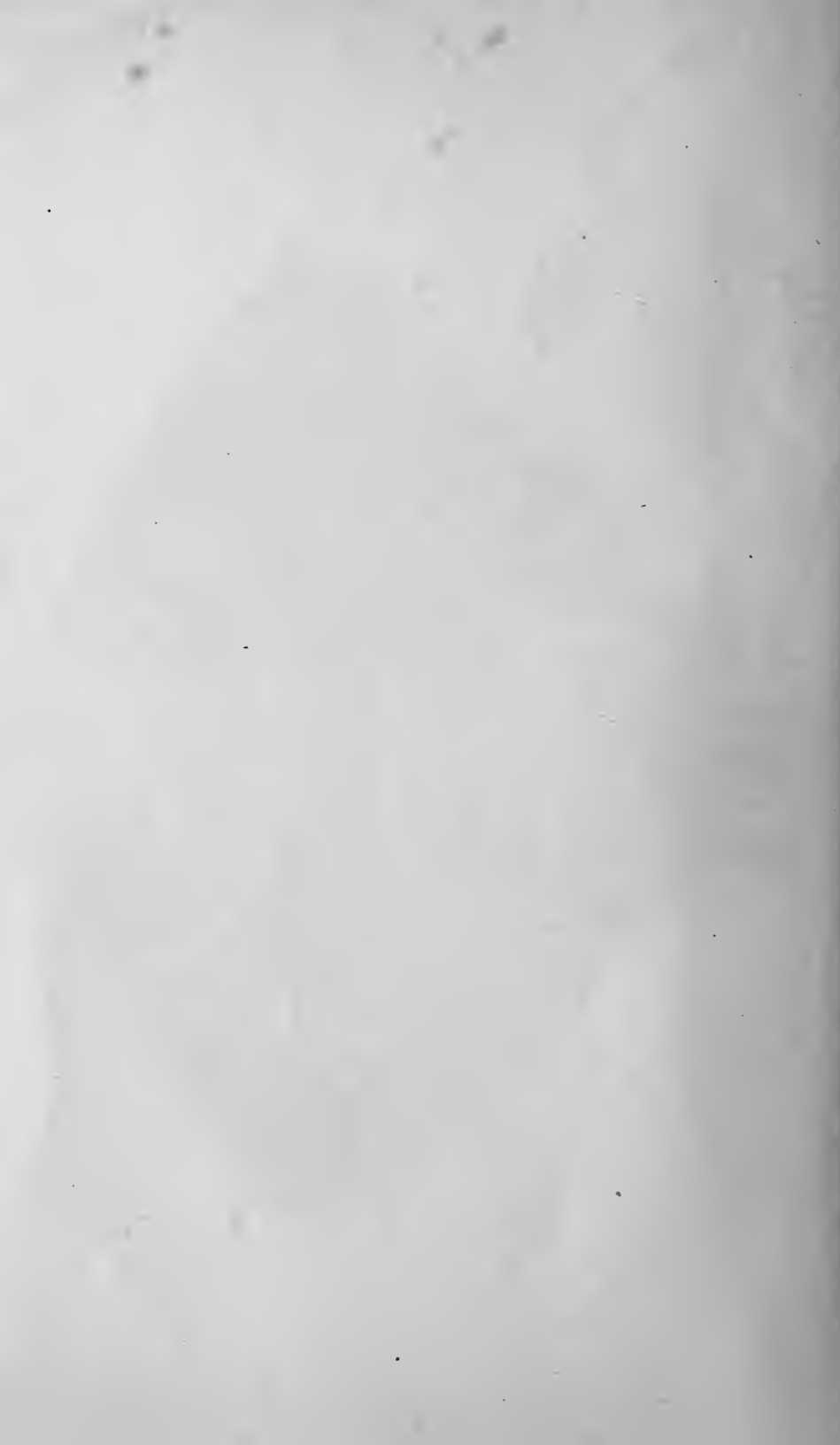
<sup>1</sup> See Ferdinand von Hochstetter, *Ueber alt-mexikanische Reliquien*, Wien, 1884. Zelia Nuttall, *Verhandlungen der Berliner anthropologischen Gesellschaft*, 1891, p. 485. Also articles "On ancient Mexican shields" and "Coyote or bear?". *Internationales Archiv für Ethnographie* Band V, 1892, and VII, 1893. Franz H. Ger, *Alt-mexikanische Reliquien aus dem Schlosse Ambras in Tirol*, Wien, 1892.

<sup>2</sup> See Y. Muler, p. 1., Nuñez-Ortega, p. 281, *Anales del Museo Nacional*, tomo III. Zelia Nuttall, *Standard or Headdress*. Peabody Museum Papers, vol. 1, No. 1. *Compte rendu de la huitième session du Congrès International des Américanistes* Paris, 1890, p. 453. Ed. Seler, *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, Band XXI, p. 63, *Verhandl.*, 1891, p. 114; ditto, 1893, p. 44. Max Uhle, *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, Heft II, p. 144.



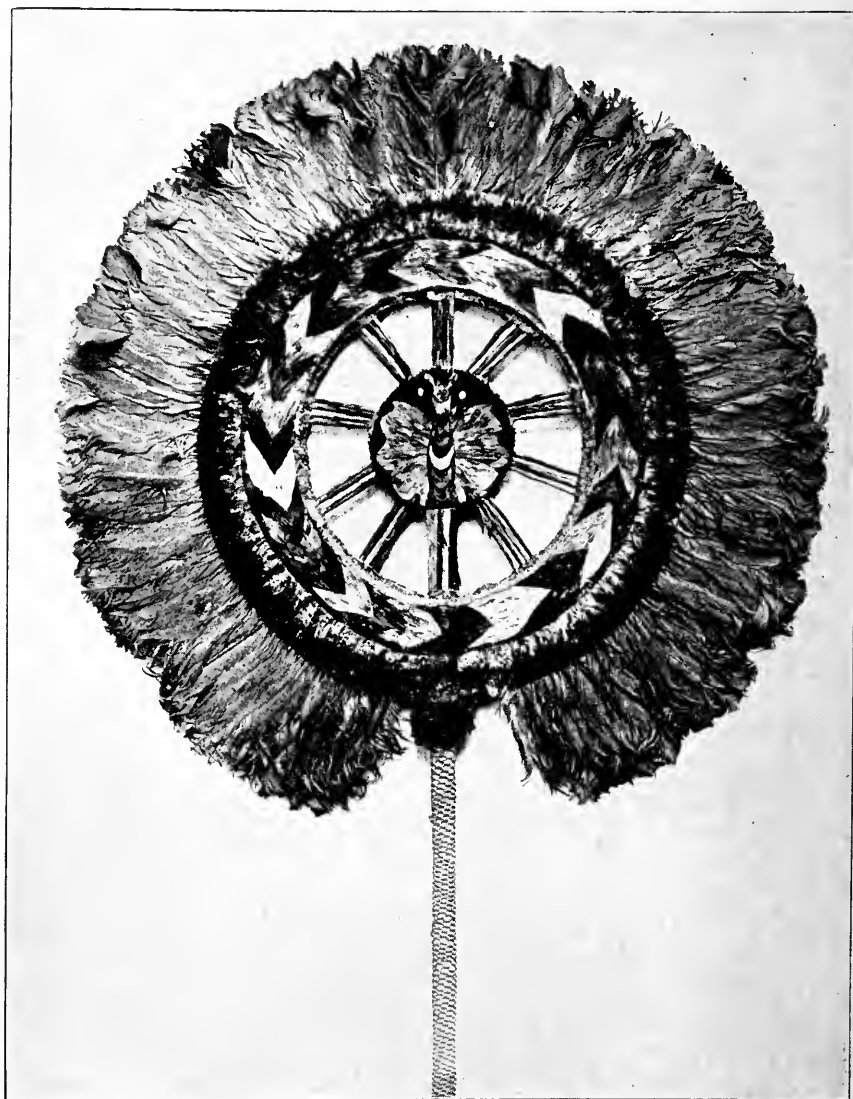
FEATHER PIECE: HEAD-DRESS (STANDARD) PRESERVED AT ETHNOGRAPHICAL MUSEUM, VIENNA.

A. Bowen & Co. Lith. Baltimore.



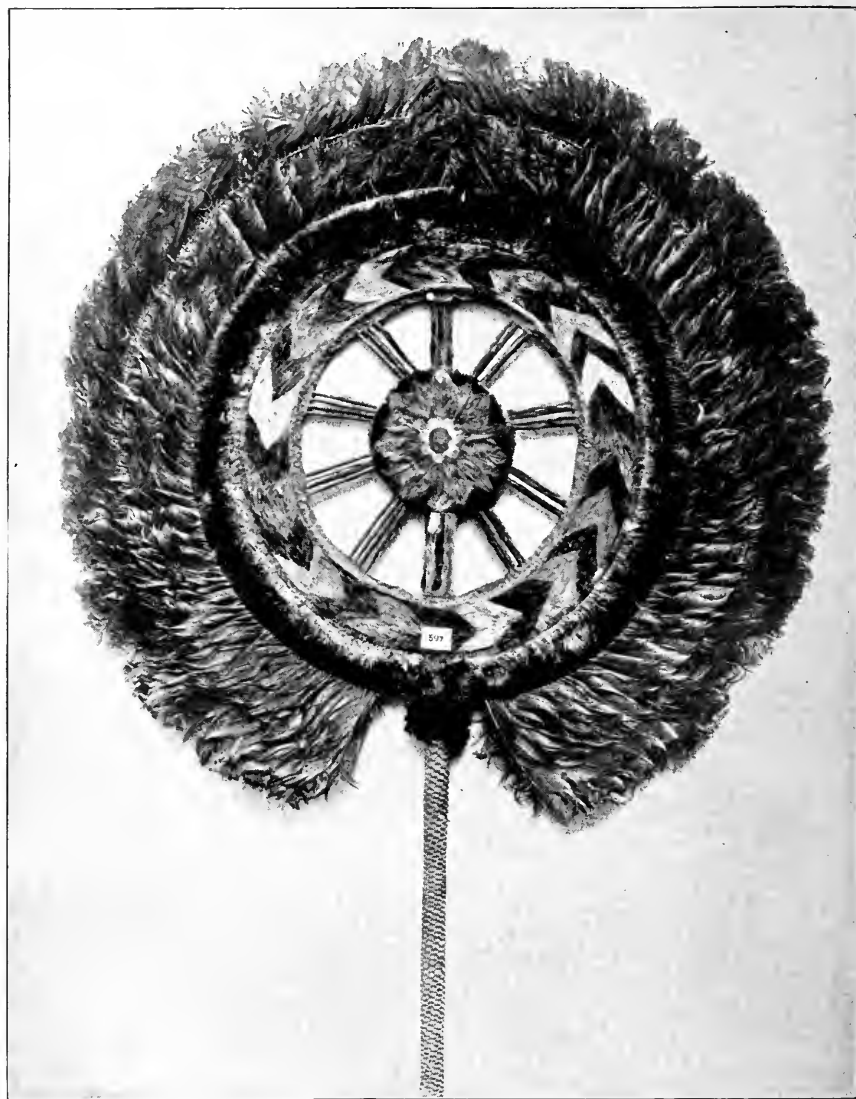






OBVERSE OF ANCIENT MEXICAN FEATHER FAN.  
Preserved at Castle Ambras, Tyrol.

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REVERSE OF ANCIENT MEXICAN FEATHER FAN.  
Preserved at Castle Ambras, Tyrol.

My study of the question led me to adopt the identification before 1596 at a time when the feather piece was complete, and when information concerning its purpose could be obtained at first hand.

In the United States section of the exhibition a picture, copied from a native manuscript, was exhibited by me. It represented a personage wearing a headdress identical in form and general character with the Vienna original. In the Austrian section the picture of this relic published by Ferdinand von Hochstetter, was displayed in one of the cases. This was the only visible record of the existence of ancient Mexican relics in the imperial museums at Vienna.

Nevertheless, they possess a larger number of fine specimens of Mexican and Hispano-Mexican feather work than any other museum in Europe or America. Besides the magnificent headdress and the Ambras shield, the Imperial Ethnographical Museum owns the curious native fan, dating from the time of the Conquest, which I also discovered at the castle of Ambras (Pls. II and III). Two other contemporary relics, not represented at the exhibition, complete the list of known specimens. The first is the interesting "delantal," or native apron, intended to be suspended from the neck, belonging to the Royal Ethnographical Museum at Berlin. This has been described by Dr. Ed. Seler in his valuable contribution published in the *Rapport du Congrès International des Américanistes*, Paris, 1890, p. 401.

The second is the mantle "of Montezuma," preserved at the Royal Museum of Armoury at Brussels, where I saw it in 1888. It is chiefly composed of scarlet feathers, and these are attached to a network by a series of knots. This unique specimen has been described by Señor Nuñez-Ortega and Dr. Ed. Seler in their respective publications already cited.

These relics complete the inventory of all of the specimens of purely indigenous feather work whose existence and whereabouts are known. Unless it should receive unforeseen additions, it shows that of the many hundreds of similar trophies which were sent to Europe by the Conquerors, there survive only: Four shields, 1 headdress, 1 fan, 1 apron, and 1 mantle; 8 pieces in all, 5 of which were represented at the Madrid Exposition.

The age and rarity of these relics undoubtedly render them extremely valuable from an ethnological standpoint. A critical examination reveals, however, that although admirable in workmanship and very effective, they scarcely testify to such an extraordinary degree of technical skill or artistic taste as to justify the panegyrics bestowed upon this branch of native industry by the Spanish chroniclers.

Thus, Fray Toribio de Motolinia wrote that newcomers in Mexico from Spain or Italy remained open-mouthed in amazement on seeing, for the first time, the exquisite work of the Amantecas, who reproduced with facility and utmost perfection in feather mosaic, any painting or design given them to copy.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Historia de los Indios de Nueva España*, ed. Izcabalceta, p. 68.

Fray Geromino de Mendieta, also writing at the close of the sixteenth century, relates that—

What seems to surpass the genius of man was the native art of producing, by means of feathers, the same results obtained by the best painters with their brushes and colors. Having, nowadays, had ample opportunities of seeing our works of art, the faculties (of the Amantecas) have been enlarged and stimulated, and it is a marvel with what perfection they exercised their art, so entirely new to us, and produced images and pictures worthy of being presented to princes, kings, and sovereign pontiffs.<sup>1</sup>

From this and further testimony, and a critical examination of samples of purely native production enumerated above, it is evident that although the art of working in feathers had long been practiced in Mexico and had developed a remarkable degree of dexterity, it did not reach its highest development until infused with new life by contact with Spanish art. Motilinia and Mendieta expatiate on the wonderful quickness of perception that characterized the native artisans in every branch of industry, and relate many instances of their producing counterparts, difficult to distinguish from the originals of European manufacture.

Toward the close of the sixteenth century native art and industry attained its highest development in the City of Mexico, under the fostering care of the Spanish missionaries who, at that time, zealously sought to educate the Indians and took a paternal interest and pride in their talents and improvement. It may be a surprise to many to learn that a few masterpieces still exist that date from this period, and were actually intended to be presented to "princes kings, or sovereign pontiffs."

Having had occasion to examine these carefully, I can testify that they fully justify the enthusiasm of the Spanish friars whose words of praise have been quoted above.

A remarkable specimen of feather mosaic, a shield (Pl. IV), dating from this period, was displayed in the historical European exhibition toward its close. This shield pertains to the royal collection of the Armory, at Madrid, and is reputed to have belonged to Phillip II. It is designated as such in the inventory preserved, but no place of origin is assigned to it. During my visit to the Royal Armory in October, 1893, the shield arrested my attention, and I identified it as being of Hispano-Mexican workmanship. Having communicated this identification to the distinguished and learned director, Count Valencia, he courteously afforded me every facility for making a close examination of the shield and kindly furnished me with photographs and historical data relating to the battle scenes depicted on its face. As a specimen of Hispano Mexican art, it became endowed with a fresh interest, and was promptly transferred to the exhibition building, where it subsequently attracted much attention. Brief notices of the above facts appeared in a Madrid paper, and in *Science*, January 3,

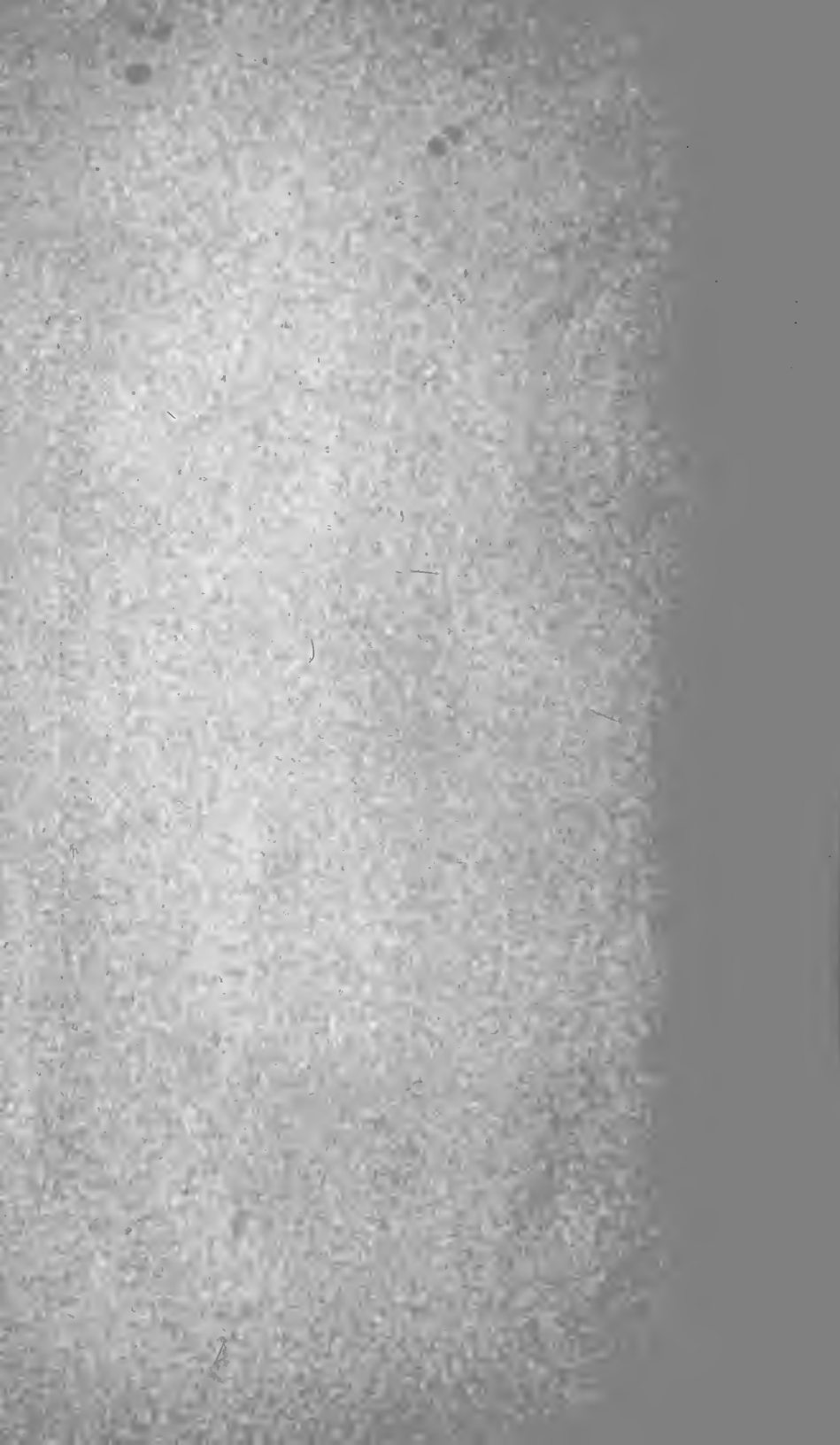
<sup>1</sup> *Historia Ecclesiastica Indiana*, ed. Izcabalceta, p. 405.



MEXICAN FEATHER MOSAIC SHIELD OF PHILIPPE II.

The subjects are : The conquest of Granada, 1492 ; the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa, 1212 ; battle of Lepanto, 1571, and the battle of Muhlberg, 1547.

Original in the Royal Armory, Madrid.





1893, but no detailed description and illustration of the shield has since been published.

It is a large "adarga," of the peculiar, rounded, heart-shaped, form that was originally Moorish, but was adopted by the Spaniards in the sixteenth century and generally used by their mounted lancers. It is made of stout leather, with ribs of cane, and may have been manufactured in Spain and sent to Mexico to be only decorated there. On the other hand, it may be a clever imitation of a Spanish shield made by a native artisan, a fact that would have enhanced its value as a curiosity. The design, executed in the tiniest of feathers and covering the entire face of the shield, shows artistic merit, and is undoubtedly of Spanish origin. A broad and beautiful border of rich arabesque design surrounds the field, which displays four divisions, each containing an historical scene. These represent the four memorable victories gained by the Spaniards. The first is the battle of "las Navas," fought under Alfonso VIII, in 1212; the second, the entry into Granada by Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492. In the third, the battle of Muhlberg, which took place in 1547, the Emperor, Charles V, is represented on horseback, in the foreground, in precisely the same attitude and armor as in his famous equestrian portrait by Titian, a fact proving that the artist who designed the decoration of the shield must have copied from the latter original.

The fourth scene shows the naval victory of Lepanto, with both fleets in action, and the Spanish conqueror, John of Austria, receiving homage from the vanquished Moors. As this event transpired in 1571, during the reign of Phillip II, the reputed possessor of the shield, a clue to its age is afforded by this date.

A curious allegorical group occupies the center of its field and consists of two herons, wearing royal crowns, one bird in a passive attitude, the other, smaller in size, advancing with outstretched wings and pecking at a recumbent wounded dragon, near to which is a smaller reptile. This curious group is surmounted by a scroll bearing the device, "*Serae. spes. unas. senectae.*" I was informed by Count de Valencia that this, translated, signifies "The only hope of declining age," and that the group represents the Roman Catholic faith (symbolized by one heron), defended by the Spanish Monarch (symbolized by the fighting bird), against infidelity and heresy (represented under the form of the dragon and smaller reptile).

A close study of the group and the motto on the scroll leads me to give the allegorical device a slightly different interpretation, and to conclude that, though made during the lifetime of Phillip II, the shield was destined for his only son and heir, for the latter was the sole person to whom the motto could apply, and therefore be appropriately inscribed on his shield. It should be borne in mind that Phillip II died in 1598, at the age of 71, and was succeeded by the only surviving offspring of his four marriages, Phillip III, aged 21.

The devotion of Phillip II to the Roman Catholic Church, the zeal with which he persecuted all heretics, his virulent persecutions of the Moriscoes, and his care to cultivate these traits in his young son, are well known. Phillip II must, indeed, have regarded his youthful heir as his only hope, and intrusted the latter with the prosecution of his ardent desire, the extirpation of infidelity and heresy in his realm. The banishment of the Moors, which had already been decreed by Charles V, was, indeed, carried into execution by Phillip III in 1609. In judging of this cruel deed it should be realized that Phillip III only fulfilled thereby the long-cherished desire not only of his father but also of his grandfather, and that the action was therefore the natural outcome of family traditions and influences.

All facts considered incline to the belief that the motto refers directly to the young infant, Phillip of Spain, and that it is he who figures on the shield under the form of the smaller heron attacking the monster, Infidelity. The larger bird, in a passive attitude, might readily represent Phillip II, the hereditary defender of the Roman Catholic faith. This inference is further corroborated by the fact that both birds wear the same form of serrated royal crowns, which would scarcely be the case if one of the herons typified the Church. Moreover, the motto could not possibly have applied to Phillip II unless bestowed upon him by his father, and the latter died in 1558, thirteen years earlier than the battle of Lepanto which figures on the shield.

The manufacture of this interesting relic must be assigned to the period between the victory at Lepanto (1571) and the death of Phillip II, in 1598. Its actual preservation is a matter of wonder and congratulation, more especially when it is realized how narrowly it escaped destruction in 1844, when a disastrous fire broke out in the Royal Armory. When rescued from this by Count de Valencia it was much disfigured by smoke and soot, and the removal of these revealed that the velvety surface had permanently lost the remainder of its former luster. Scant traces of humming-bird feathers are left to testify to the lost splendor of the rich border. Fortunately, the battle scenes are comparatively uninjured, and are of such exquisite, minute, and perfect mosaic work that even in its present condition the shield deserves to be termed a marvel of human ingenuity and technical skill.

It has a rival in the beautiful bishop's miter that belongs to the royal treasury in the Pitti Palace at Florence, and is in a remarkable and almost perfect state of preservation. Visitors to the United States section of the exhibition were able to form an idea of the original from the miniature copies partly executed in metallic colors that I exhibited there. The front and back of the miter and its pendants are entirely covered with an extremely rich design of a religious character, executed in feather mosaic. The design is evidently the work of a Spaniard, for the names of the apostles and patriarchs depicted around the border are in the Spanish language. At a first glance it might be supposed

that the miter was either enameled or on copper, painted on velvet or silk, but an indescribably beautiful and novel effect is produced by the employment of a background entirely composed of the wing feathers with metallic luster that grow on the heads and breasts of tropical humming birds. When I first saw the precious relic and made inquiries about its age and origin I was informed by the custodian in charge that it dated from the seventeenth century and had belonged to a cardinal or pope of the Medici family.<sup>1</sup>

No documentary evidence seems, however, to be obtainable. The indication given leads, however, to the conclusion that the miter belonged to the Cardinal Alessandro de Medici, a native of Florence, who died in 1605, a few weeks after his consecration as Pope Leo XI.

The relic is thus assigned to the same period as the Madrid shield, and the comparison between the workmanship of each seems to indicate that they were both made by the same hand.

A second miter, apparently of the same style of design and execution, is preserved at the Kunsthistorisches Hofmuseum at Vienna. I recently learned of its existence by a mere chance, and I believe that this is not generally known.

In his article cited above, Hochstetter mentions that he first found the ancient Mexican feather piece, which he identified as a standard, "next to a bishop's miter" in a museum case.

Beyond this bare mention I know of no publication in which the miter figures. Not having visited Vienna since I learned of its preservation there, I am indebted to the kindness of a scientific friend for the following data concerning it. The relic is displayed in Case IV, hall 23, is entered as No. 48, in the official general catalogue, wherein it was described as follows:

Miter, of Hispano-Mexican workmanship, covered with a mosaic composed of humming-bird feathers. On the obverse the genealogical tree of Christ is represented. The reverse displays a rosebush with the apostles and a crucifix issuing forth from its flowers.

In the special catalogue of the same year, 1891, the following valuable detail is added:

The word Buenagia, meaning Good Road and being the motto of the Spanish D'Avila family, occurs in each of the pendants above the embroidered arms of a cardinal. With the exception of these arms that are embroidered in silks, the entire miter is of feather mosaic.

In the above catalogues no date is assigned to the miter, but it seemingly belongs to the Ambras collection and consequently antedates 1595.

It seems as though, after having been made in Mexico, the miter was only assigned to an owner when it reached Europe, for the embroidered arms could not have formed part of the original design, and must have

<sup>1</sup>See Zelia Nuttall, *Ouvrages en plumes du Mexique. Rapport du Congrès des Américanistes*, Paris. 1890, p. 460.

been an unforeseen and necessary addition made at a later period with means at hand.

Toward the period to which the miter evidently belongs, two distinguished members of the D'Avila family held high ecclesiastical positions in Spain, but thus far I have not succeeded in ascertaining whether either of them attained cardinalship.

Sancho d'Avila, born at Avila in Old Castile in 1546, was consecutively bishop of Murcia, Jaen, Sagonte, and Placentia, and died in 1625.

Gil Gonzalez d'Avila was born at Avila in 1559 (according to Chambers' Encyclopedia), or in 1578 (according to Oettinger, *Moniteur des dates*), and died in 1658. He was a Jesuit, a canon of Salamanca and, moreover, royal historiographer for Castile and the Indies. He wrote many voluminous works, the best known of which is perhaps the *Teatro Ecclesiastica de la primitiva Iglesia de las Indias Occidentales* (Madrid, 1649-1656). Although these facts do not suffice to establish the individual ownership of the miter, they certainly reveal an interesting connection between the D'Avila family, the Church, and Mexico. It will be interesting to ascertain how and when the miter came into the possession of Archduke Ferdinand, who was one of the most indefatigable collectors and curiosity hunters of his time.

The three historical relics that have been described are probably specimens of the finest feather mosaic produced in Mexico at the culminating period, when the best native workers were employed in copying beautiful designs made by Spanish artists. A high form of decorative art was thus developed, the productions of which rival a miniature on vellum for delicacy of execution and combining the beauties of a silky, smooth surface like that of velvet, with a metallic brilliancy of color and iridescence resembling that of the Limoges enamels. When strictly confined and applied to decorative purposes, as in these specimens, the native art of painting with feathers affords even now artistic gratification and evokes admiration and approval. The same can not be said of the curious reproductions of Spanish paintings, usually pictures of saints, which became a favorite and staple production of the native artists. A few samples of this kind were exhibited in the Mexican section of the exhibition, and consisted of a series of finely-executed copies of Spanish pictures of saints, and a large archaic head of Christ of native design and coarse execution.

I was informed that these were probably the oldest existing specimens preserved in Mexico, and that they had recently been discovered in an old provincial church.

The only specimen of the kind in Europe to which a date can safely be assigned, are those which originally belonged to the Ambras collection, and consequently antedate 1596. One of these, representing St. Jerome and the lion in the desert, is still preserved at the Castle of Ambras, and attention was drawn to it in my publication on "Ancient Mexican shields."

Two other pictures representing a Madonna and St. Peter before Christ are now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum at Vienna, and are numbered 24 and 25 in the general catalogue.

The Royal Ethnographical Museum in Berlin and Mr. Phillip Bectier (?), of Darmstadt, possess some fine examples of the kind. It would be difficult to determine the precise age of the majority of these curiosities of technical skill, as the native art has never become extinct in Mexico, and is even practiced to the present day. Unfortunately whereas the best and apparently oldest specimens are painstaking copies of excellent originals, the more modern productions show a steady deterioration of workmanship, taste, and design. A painful contrast to earlier productions is the meritorious but utterly inartistic historical relic that occupied a conspicuous place in the National Museum of the City of Mexico, and is described in the catalogue as "Arms of the Republic of Mexico, surrounded by trophies, composed of feathers in imitation of the old native feathers-mosaic work by Señor José Rodríguez, who presented it to the congress in 1829."

A brief summary of the present report establishes that there exists at the present day eight fine specimens of purely native work, dating from the time of the Conquest. The exhibition contained the originals of two and copies of three of these. Of the three masterpieces of Hispano-Mexican art preserved, one was exhibited in original and another in copy.

Moreover, reproductions of paintings by means of feathers were also displayed, and thus the exhibition afforded unprecedented opportunities for the study of the different branches of the peculiar art of working in feathers, invented and practiced by the aborigines of Mexico.

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